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AUTHOR Veguez, Roberto
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ABSTRACT

It was found that the seemingly greatly increased oral fluency of Middlebury College seniors who had studied in college-sponsored junior year abroad programs did not carry over to written skills or to comprehensive grammatical knowledge. In the oral proficiency interview for Spanish, many returning students had no control of the subjunctive, a key to attaining successive proficiency levels, and had developed elaborate strategies for avoiding using those constructions. The foreign experience, rather than promoting true language proficiency, was found to be manufacturing "terminal 2+" students, or expensively trained street speakers of the language. Precautions taken at Middlebury to avoid this situation in the future include redesigning Spanish courses taught beyond the normal language sequence at the undergraduate level, both at home and in the foreign country, to include more work in the subjunctive and other structures of similar difficulty. Increased writing assignments in the grammar course and all other courses while abroad are also recommended. (MSE)

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The Oral Proficiency Interview and the Junior Year Abroad: Some Unexpected Results

Since their founding in 1915, the Middlebury College Language Schools have been recognized as a leader in foreign language instruction in this country. A combination of an international faculty, highly motivated students and a cultural immersion approach to language learning have contributed to the Schools' reputation. Middlebury is also well-known for its rigidly enforced language pledge. Before undertaking a program of studies that can vary in length from two to nine weeks and in levels from beginning to post-doctoral, the students sign a pledge promising to use only the foreign language for the duration of the summer session. It can be argued that oral proficiency for a certain kind of survival has always been the foundation of Middlebury's philosophy. For weeks at a time, students live the language--they not only study it, but they also carry on their day to day activities without using English. In a sense, they have to "survive in the economy," as the proficiency guidelines state. For the well motivated it is an ideal situation. The students live totally immersed in the language and the culture of another country in a non-threatening environment, where they can try out their newly acquired

linguistic and cultural skills just a few hours from home, rather than across an ocean, and surrounded by teachers and advanced students ready to help when problems arise with the language.[1]

The ultimate test for the student of any foreign language, however, is to live in the country where that language is used. Middlebury decided to facilitate the taking of that next step on the road to proficiency by establishing programs in Moscow, Madrid, Mainz, Florence and Paris. As the program now operates, graduate students spend a summer at the Vermont campus. If they meet the school requirements at the end of the summer, they are invited to join our overseas programs where they complete their work towards a Master of Arts. The combination of a summer here and two semesters abroad has been as successful as that of the summers only programs. It soon became apparent that these centers abroad would be very useful to undergraduates on a September to May schedule. The Middlebury Junior Year Abroad program that was developed has grown steadily through the years. Even though it is not obligatory for majors in the languages to attend any of our programs abroad, the number of juniors, majors and non-majors who avail themselves of this opportunity to study with our programs or with others in the U. S. and Great Britain is now almost 50% of the Junior class, much to the consternation of some who argue that the absence of Juniors in such large numbers causes a significant change in the quality of life of any small, four-year liberal arts college because Juniors give stability and balance to student life. The Junior Year Abroad

program lures away this stabilizing influence. We in the languages argue in favor by pointing to the gains students make. "Students come back more mature, more cosmopolitan, with an understanding of another culture that could not have been achieved in the classroom on the home campus. Their language ability is simply outstanding--we are amazed by their conversations, their intonation patterns, their street vocabulary which is so current that even the teachers don't know it yet. We hear them rattling on about this and that bar, or restaurant, or trip, or play." Or so we claimed.

But we really didn't listen. Not systematically, anyway. Dazzled as we were by our students' new found fluency, we failed to assess it properly. We perhaps weren't even aware that there might be a problem because we had no way of noticing it. The juniors, now seniors, were a great asset in the classroom because they could talk. The lucky teacher of the senior seminar could for once discuss with the students the topic of his or her dissertation and be reasonably sure that everyone would follow the meaning of what was being said and comment on it, perhaps intelligently or perhaps not, but intelligibly, in any event.

There was one curious problem, however: our seniors' intelligibility, their loquacity even, many times did not carry over to the written page. Their essays were flawed in many aspects of grammar that did not seem to bother them when they spoke--their sentences were choppy, their abstract thought were

expressed sloppily, inadmissible colloquialisms kept creeping into their vocabulary, etc. There was a discrepancy between what we heard and what we read from our returning juniors. What was happening?

By this time last year my training as an interviewer and that of my colleague in French had advanced far enough so that we felt confident in applying what we had learned to Middlebury students. We didn't know exactly what to expect and I for one had some misgivings. On the one hand, there is the problems that the system has been in operation for such a short period of time, that we haven't collected enough data to arrive at significant conclusions. The Oral Proficiency Interview is a useful but delicate tool in the foreign language teacher's arsenal, and it should not be allowed to go the way of other so-called fads with which our profession seems to be afflicted with worrisome regularity. And that may happen if in our rush to make use of it we fail to maintain the very standards we're trying to define. On the other hand, our most preliminary use of the OPI and of the ACTFL-ETS guidelines turned up information that, if proven accurate, could have important implications for the foreign language curriculum. Hence this report.

We went ahead with our interviews of our returning Juniors, now Seniors. Please keep in mind that at this time, we still shared our colleagues' perception of the proficiency level of these particular students--we thought that they would certainly

be Superior. There was evidence to the contrary coming from other sources, however--there was the John Carroll study, published almost twenty years ago, in 1967, indicating that most college graduates majoring in a language had reached by the time of graduation, after years of study, only level 2 or 2+, which meant that they did not have professional working proficiency in the language. As Judith Liskin-Gasparro put it: "The goal of government language schools is to train professional personnel to achieve a useful level of language proficiency, and thus, the levels below 3 are seen largely as way stations in the training process."[2] In the eyes of the government, then, the graduates from our language departments do not have a "useful" grasp of their subject. Carroll's report notwithstanding, we persevered in our interviewing, secure in the knowledge that "it can't happen here," to coin a phrase. Unfortunately, it could, and it did. In a particular series of tests in French, for example, of the students who took the test and who had spent two semesters in Paris the year before, 66% rated Advanced Plus, and 33% simply Advanced. In Spanish, of the students in the same situation, 41% rated Advanced, 33% Advanced Plus, and 26% Superior, although 1/3 of this Superior group consisted of native speakers. The results of the Spanish portion of the tests need to be looked at more carefully, first, because Spanish is the only language of all those tested by FSI where there is a direct link between attainment of a certain level and a discrete grammatical structure; and second, because as a tester, I could see that the

way the candidates or students handled this particular problem was going to be cause for concern.

I think we would all agree that the ideal would be for our language majors to graduate with a level 3 or Superior classification. The list of task universals for the Superior level in the ACTFL/ETS provisional guidelines reads: "Handles unfamiliar topics or situations. Hypothesizes. Provides supported opinions." For these last two to occur in Spanish, the candidate must have a certain control of the subjunctive forms of the verb and their uses. To quote from the ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual:

> ... there is only one language, Spanish, where the lack of a single structure, the subjunctive, would keep the candidate from obtaining a Level 3 rating. This is true for Spanish because the subjunctive is used for a large number of Level 3 constructions expressed by other constructions in other languages. In the languages that the government has worked with so far, this is the only such case discovered.[3]

In fact, the subjunctive must begin to appear at Level 2(Advanced). The grammar grid for Spanish indicates that at Level 2, the subjunctive in indirect commands should be present; Level 2+ asks for the present subjunctive to express hope, emotions, uncertainty, doubt, negative antecedents; Level 3 requires correct use of the present subjunctive 80% of the time,

of the present perfect and imperfect subjunctive 50%, and knowledge of it in the pluperfect form of its use with impersonal, adjectival and adverbial phrases. Also in the simple tenses of the contrary to fact statements. Quite a tall order.

One of the benefits of training as an interviewer is that one is taught to listen "below the flow of speech," that is, to be alert to the actual language being produced, and not to pay attention to other distractors, such as speed of production, vocabulary, intonation, body language, etc. In my interviews I discovered to my surprise that most of the returning students had no control of the subjunctive, or very little of it. But what was really significant about this not altogether unexpected finding was my own realization of how adept these students had become at avoiding those constructions, or when that was impossible, at covering up for them in one way or another. Listening to the interviews again and again, I could determine that the students were so clever in their strategies of avoidance that only a trained listener could detect it. And this state of affairs simply can not be allowed to continue. Because, in effect, what we were getting back in return for our efforts and their efforts were Terminal 2's.

Terminal 2 or Terminal 2+ is a term used by Pardee Lowe in his manual to define so called street speakers of a language. According to Lowe, the terminal 2+ "communicates despite the niceties of Target Language grammar. ... The terminal 2+

glibness and ease, ready--if not always accurate--vocabulary, can mislead the untrained tester into thinking that the candidate is a competent speaker (Level 3 and up), where he or she is merely an 'abominably fluent' one."[4] A terminal 2+, like all terminal speaker at levels below that one, is linguistically speaking, stuck. As documented in an article by Higgs and Clifford, it is extremely difficult for students in that terminal condition to pull out of it, to recover, so to speak. It would seem that our testing proves the point made by Higgs and Clifford in the following passage, quoted by Omaggio:

> There appears to be a real danger of leading the student too rapidly into the "creative aspects of language use," in that if successful communication is encouraged and rewarded for its own sake, the effect seems to be one of rewarding at the same time the <u>incorrect</u> communication strategies seized upon in attempting to deal with the communication situations presented. When these reinforced communication strategies fossilize prematurely, their subsequent modification or ultimate correction is rendered difficult to the point of impossibility.[5]

And as for the teacher, Lowe describes his or her situation very graphically in his definition of terminal: "'Terminal' of course, is not a testing term, but a pedagogical one derived from the depressing experience of trying to better such speakers'

language in the classroom."[6]

If it is a term heretofore used for street speakers of a language, what I was finding out in the interviews, was that the foreign experience was in effect manufacturing terminal 2+s. We, and I dare say, most of us who send students abroad, were turning out expensively trained street speakers of the language.

What is the best solution can be the topic for further study. As I see it, we should not lose sight of the fact that as students move up the pyramid of achievement, from Novice to Advanced, the aspects of their learning that takes precedence over all other, especially at level 3, is grammar, and in the case of Spanish, a specific point in grammar, i.e., the subjunctive. We must avoid the terminal condition before it sets in. Since the problem was not defined until very recently, I am still searching for ways to solve it. For starters, I have redesigned the courses that I teach beyond the normal language sequence to include more work in the subjunctive and in other structures of similar difficulty, such as the proper use of the gerund, of the neuter article lo, and also the preterit and imperfect. I have also asked our director in Madrid that our curriculum abroad go over the same points, before the bad habits become ingrained. We currently have such courses in existence in the curriculum but at the graduate level only. It should not be very difficult to teach a section specifically for undergraduates.

The test of the effectiveness of these measures will have to wait for confirmation until next year, when this year's juniors return. But I think they are a necessary precaution, since I agree with Omaggio when she cautions:

> Until concrete and compelling evidence is provided that accuracy in language production develops without correction of errors and attention to form in adult second-language acquisitions, this writer will assume (that) careful error correction and concern for accuracy is important for the eventual development of proficiency beyond Level 2/2+. This means that the teacher who opts for full skill development will need somehow to combine a concern for fostering "communication" with a concern for accuracy early in instruction. This fundamental principle necessarily underlies the design of any approach to language instruction that is truly proficiency oriented.[7]

You will recall that at the beginning of this presentation I mentioned the discrepancy between the perceived oral proficiency of our students and their skills at writing, which did not match the former. Now we know why. Writing at the college level involves the use of those constructions that the students were trying to avoid. It is more difficult to get away with not using them on paper. Again here there's room for improvement, by increasing the writing assignments while abroad, perhaps in

conjunction with the grammar course, but ideally in all other courses as well.

In one of the workshops conducted at the 1984 Northeast Conference, Pardee Lowe appeared to confirm the idea that one's skills could stagnate or decline abroad. Vocabulary does increase, but grammar seems to atrophy. This shows that the problem goes beyond the young people in the Junior Year Abroad programs, and that more work needs to be done on how that language loss actually happens.

For the moment, however, we must deal immediately with the linguistic problems encountered in an otherwise excellent experience. By training as many of our teachers as possible in the methods and standards of the oral interview, by having a clear goal in mind, with a precise, measurable definition of what it is that we want our students to have accomplished at the end of 4 years of study and of the steps that lead there, we may be able to better serve not only our students, but ourselves as teachers as well.

Roberto Véguez
Middlebury College

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5. Alice Omaggio, "The Proficiency-Oriented Classroom," Teaching for Proficiency 49-50.

6. Lowe 3-11

7. Omagio 50